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ABSTRACT

Genograms (a "psychological" family tree) can reveal how the family communicates about its past. The drawing of the family tree becomes an exercise in communication. In a classroom assignment, students can do their own genogram or create one by doing interviews with a family to gain insights into various dimensions of the family's communication. Further uses of the genogram can facilitate exploration of decision making, power, patterns of dominance or submissiveness, interdependence within the family. Contradiction frequently occurs in the interrelationships among family members. Elements of the contradictions from a dialectical perspective can be found in many genograms. The superimposing of the lines of communication on the basic family facts of a family tree or genogram can illuminate many important facets of how the family communicates effectively or ineffectively over the generations. (RS)

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ED 403 624

Family Communication Division
Speech Communication Association
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Program: The Interface Between the Classroom and the Clinic: Learning From One Another

Date: Saturday, November 23

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Paper: "Insights Gained from the Use of Genograms to Analyze Communication Dimensions in Family Systems."

In this paper I will present several sample genograms I have worked out with family members in the clinic setting. I will use these genograms to reveal how the family or individual family of origin members communicate about their past. I have secured permission from each owner of the genogram to share their family information, including secrets. Ideas in families come down for generations! Messages often have their basis in the family of origin. When a couple marries or decides to live together, each partner brings into the relationship ideas from the previous family system, including rules, boundaries, behaviors, and expectations. Each of these influence communication.

The drawing of the family tree becomes an exercise in communication. Issues such as how open or closed the system is to the larger community becomes apparent. Rules about what you can or cannot talk about emerge. Family myths, themes, secrets, etc. are revealed in the conversations about the facts of who is related to whom. Information about occupations, illnesses, accidents, desertions, divorces, abortions, prison sentences, reasons for death, etc. of family members can become a part of understanding the "family tree". The processing of this communication can be quite helpful to clients. In a classroom assignment, students could do their own genogram or create one by doing interviews with a family to gain these insights into various dimensions of the family's communication.



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The facts that make up the genograms serve as indicators for understanding and probing into the communication that takes place within a family system. On the genogram, lines of communication can be drawn between family members. Broken lines can indicate where family members were "cut off". Solid dark double lines can indicate tight, continuous open communication between members of the system. Dotted lines can indicate connected but separated or limited communication. Circles around some family members names indicate that they have created subsystems. By placing these additional markings on the genogram, family networks appear. Both the family member drawing the genogram and any observers can observe how messages get processed within a family system. Discussions about networking within the families can reveal how the hierarchy works in the system, and if it works efficiently or ineffectively to facilitate meaningful interactions.

Further uses of the genogram can facilitate exploration of decision making, power, patterns of dominance or submissiveness, interdependence, etc. within the family. All of these ideas have communication dimensions. Through the use of the genogram, members of a family could get a better sense of how they communicate effectively or ineffectively within that system. The last part of the paper covers how the genogram can indicate some of the dialectical dimensions of closeness and distance; predictability and novelty; affection and instrumentality; judgment and acceptance; expressiveness and protectiveness; autonomy and connection; independence and dependence. The genogram can become an instrument to reveal and explicate the dynamics of communication within a family system.

Time permits only a few illustrations of the dialectical dimensions of family communication that appear in genograms. Each genogram depicts behind the surface tensions of what Baxter and Montgomery (1996) describe as the "both/and"

quality of relationships, illustrated by family members' need to talk or desire not to talk. In the Mendelson genogram, the news of their son's increasing dependence upon them when he came home to die of Aids, forced the family into new tensions and ways of relating. They could no longer protect the privacy of their son's homosexuality and his serious health problems. The "both/and" tension came out of a need to be honest with family and neighbors and take risks to secure support from these same people in this time of crises. The genogram provides suggestions of where the mother and father might be most likely to receive support within the family system--relatives they could share the news with and expect support, minimal rejection or abandonment.

In the R[illegible]g family the "both/and" dimension appears in the daughter's (Joanne) need to talk about the alcoholism in the family, especially her father's, and the knowledge that her closest ally, her mother, doesn't want to hear about it. The same problem exists in bringing up the fact that the neighbor and closest family friend of her mother is molesting her. Even within Joanne there is a "both/and" dialectical dilemma. This neighbor provided an important role model the distant alcoholic father didn't. He encouraged Joanne's multiple talents in art, music, and dance. He paid for lessons and took her to plays, art shows, etc. He nurtured her in many important ways, even from an early age, but be began abusing her at 14. It wasn't until after he died that she sorted out in therapy the "both/and" dimensions of this relationship. As an adult in her own marriage, she experienced ramifications of this "both/and" dichotomy in that she never felt consistently close to her husband or trusting with men in any form of relationship. As Baxter noted, a dialectical tension may not be consciously felt or expressed and instead work behind the family scene and lead to relationship changes. (1990, 80-88.) Note in her genogram that she married into a family similar to her own--alcoholic and secretive.

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Between the dialectical dimension of autonomy and connectedness; between openness and closeness; between novelty and predictability there can be seen by a therapist or a teacher of family communication numerous examples of these tensions in either the Ring or Mendelson genograms.

Contradiction frequently occurs in the interrelationships between family members. From a dialectical perspective, contradictions can be either positive or negative and often force or facilitate change (Baxter and Montgomery, 144-145). The tension develops in the dialectical dimensions of stable versus unstable or loving versus not loving. These tensions are contradictory but simultaneously they are unified or interdependent within members in the family system. Some children in dysfunctional families learn that a sense of belonging or being loved is conditional and varies depending upon the behaviors of the parents or caregivers. These oppositional aspects are unified in the interdependent dimensions of the family system. Communication links the members one to another. One family member's identity as an autonomous person is connected to the negative or positive identities of those other family members he or she must coexist with in the home. A dialectical view of family members' interactions recognizes how these members manage the simultaneous nature of both loving and nonloving characteristics in their experiences within the system.

Elements of the contradictions from a dialectical perspective can be found in many of the genograms I am sharing with you today. In the Jeanne family chart marriage is no longer an expected ritual--note most family members cohabit, yet in spite of the obvious contradictions this family survives in some form. The same is true of the other families.

Time won't permit an analysis via the use of these genograms of the dialectical dimensions of change (the interplay of stability and flux), praxis

(the fact family members are simultaneously both actors and objects of their own actions), and totality (a way of thinking about the family as a process of relations or interdependencies). Totality includes examining where contradictions exist, "the interdependencies among contradictions, and contextualization of contradictory interplay." (147)

There is a definite interface between the classroom and the clinic. We have learned much from one another. The superimposing of the lines of communication on the basic family facts of a family tree or genogram can illuminate many important facets of how the family communicates effectively or ineffectively over the generations. The lines of networks to other subsystems, or the lack of them, provides us with insights into why who says what to whom in different contexts. Once we know these answers we can begin to interpret the fascinating and more revealing underlying dialectical tensions in the families.

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